New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1952

Volume XIII, Number 21 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of November 3, 1952

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**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of November 3, 1952*

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New York Theatre Critics' Reviews

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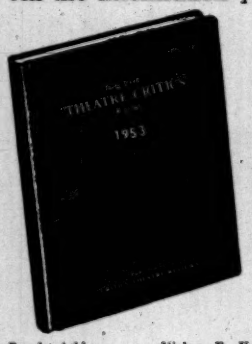

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"Dial M for Murder"

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

October 30, 1952

'Dial M for Murder' a Thriller-Diller

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Maurice Evans has a habit of doing with remarkable success things that most other people cannot do at all in the theater. In "Dial M for Murder" he is reviving a thriller of a type rarely seen nowadays, and doing it with eminent aplomb.

This is a suspense play, by reason of the fact that the audience knows the guilty party from the start. The tension grows from the efforts of the other characters to lay the blame on him.

Unlike most works of the "mystery" category, this one has believable characters, convincing motives and an entirely honest giveaway for its climax. When the curtain falls you are liable to find you have been biting your nails for half an hour.

Criminal Blackmailed.

An element that makes the play most acceptable is the uniformly excellent performance by the small cast, and the thoroughly steady direction of Reginald Denham.

The original setup of the play is not distinguished, as a reformed tennis bum decides to take action against his rich wife, who has rediscovered a former lover. The artful ex-athlete blackmails a criminal to murder the wife. In the scuffle she manages to kill her attacker. Subtly the husband hints her guilt, and the finale occurs on the day before her scheduled execution.

As is so often true of such a play, the bulk of the talk is frankly used to arrive at a really exciting situation which can be milked for suspense and excitement. The advantage here is that the conversation, informative as it has to be, is literate and believable.

Supersilence.

The last act involves an inspector who is elaborately trying to prove a point, which is clear neither to the other characters nor to you. When he explains himself and lays his final trap there is a grand supply of supersilence in the house as everyone guesses.

Evans dominates the performance by his expert playing of the homicidal sport. He is thoroughly unpleasant, yet retains a superficial charm that reasonably takes in his associates. Whenever the ice gets thin for him it is quite remarkable how he is able to show his apprehension to the audience without tipping off the people of the story.

Gusti Huber, who made such a smashing local debut last year on Broadway, is once more Grade A here. Her role calls for sudden spurts of passionate terror, which she supplies with utter conviction on the shortest notice. Whether guilty, gay, hysterical or whipped, she is consistently honest in her communication.

Others in Cast.

John Williams has most of the play's humor as the classical, terse inspector who cares nothing for the opinion of others but wends his tedious way to the right ending. His aloof manner and enlightened timing add an individual spice to the last half of the play.

Richard Derr is well cast and entirely at home in the role of the wife's lover, and Anthony Dawson is equally suitable in his playing of the extinguished criminal.

You "Dial M for Murder" on a high-tension wire.

"DIAL M FOR MURDER"

Play by Frederick Knott; staged by Reginald Denham; setting and lighting by Peter Larkin; costumes by Noel Taylor; presented by James P. Sherwood at the Plymouth Theatre, October 29, 1952. The cast:

Margot Wendice....Gusti Huber
Max Halliday.....Richard Derr
Tony Wendice...Maurice Evans
Capt. Lesgate..Anthony Dawson
Inspector Hubbard.....
John Williams
Thompson.... Porter Van Zandt

New York Post

October 30, 1952

By Richard Watts Jr.

That Good Murder Drama at Last

Those of us who have felt for a long time that one of the needs of the local theater was a good murder melodrama had our wish gratified at the Plymouth last night, and I think we should all be grateful to the English for helping us out in the matter. The answer to our prayer is Frederick Knott's "Dial 'M' for Murder," which, as returned American travelers have been reporting, is currently a vast critical and popular triumph in the British capital, and it seems to me there is every reason for suspecting it will prove that remarkable rarity, a London hit that is equally successful in New York.

Many of us who enjoyed it in London last summer were a little afraid that its slightly lethargic beginning and its frankly complicated plot maneuverings might handicap Mr. Knott's play for American theatergoers, who tend to look on murder dramas as purely escapist entertainment and not the rigorous intellectual exercises that English audiences relish. Somehow, there seemed no such trouble last night. In our travel snobbery, we were probably underrating the taste of our fellow-countrymen. You do have to watch a certain matter of some keys rather carefully, but, otherwise, there is little difficulty in following it.

Not a Mystery

For those who haven't been reading about "Dial 'M' for Murder," it should be noted that, although it is a drama in which Scotland Yard solves a murder case, it isn't one of those mystery tales in which the audience is set to guessing the identity of an unknown killer. You know from the start all about the culprit. What Mr. Knott's drama is concerned with is the manner in which the sinister and homicidal plot of Tony Wendice, the ex-tennis champion, to do away with his wife is eventually exposed. The fun comes from following the evil machinations of the scoundrel and wondering how his alibi is going to be broken down.

Since suspense, rather than mystery, is the concern of the drama, the reticence usually demanded from reviewers of detective stories can be dispensed with, and it can be told that this is the tale of how the monstrous ex-athlete blackmails a shabby acquaintance into a plot to kill hapless Mrs. Wendice; how the plot goes wrong and the would-be assassin is himself killed, and how the husband almost arranges for his wife to be hanged for a premeditated murder. Mr. Knott takes his own good time in getting around to the business of smashing his villain's carefully built-up case, but he manages it very neatly.

Mental Game

Perhaps you should be warned that the English melodrama is actually less concerned with emotional excitement and the pathos of the wife's plight than it is with the rigorous manipulations of the making and smashing of the plot against the poor lady. It is a kind of cool, cerebral game the author is playing, and it is advisable to follow him pretty carefully as he goes about it in his amiably devious fashion. But he manages it so skillfully and fairly, and he is so thoroughly ingenious and intelligent about it that the result is excellent fun for those of us who are fond of fictional homicide.

In general, I doubt if "Dial 'M' for Murder" is as well played in the American production as it is in London, and I thought the scene between the husband and his unwilling accomplice lacked the excitement it had when I saw it originally. That may be because Maurice Evans, who plays the homicidal athlete, had his moments of uncertainty last night. On the whole, though, he is excellent, as are Gusti Huber as the wife, Richard Derr as her American admirer, and Anthony Dawson as the slain accomplice. But it is that invariably fine actor, John Williams, as the Scotland Yard man, who dominates the evening and plays the chief part in making the drama so pleasantly enthralling.

The New York Times

October 30, 1952

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

In case the external world is not frightening enough, you are respectfully directed to Frederick Knott's "Dial M for Murder," which opened at the Plymouth last evening. It is a British thriller which Maurice Evans has had the wisdom to bring across the water and in which he gives a marvelously expert performance.

You may not be thinking of Mr. Evans as a blackguard and murderer, and a swine objectionable in other respects, too. But there is no doubt that he has a talent for depravity that most of us have never suspected in one of the leading Shakespearean actors in the country.

In "Dial M for Murder" he is the malign husband of a woman he has married for her money and whom he plans now to murder for the same reason. He arranges the perfect murder. He blackmails a scoundrel he used to know into strangling her for a fee of one thousand pounds, and arranges a brilliant alibi for himself. Unfortunately for our Maury, the murderer gets murdered and the victim survives. During the rest of the evening our former Hamlet and Richard II keeps only a hop, skip and jump ahead of discovery and disaster.

If you insist on being a perfectionist, you can fairly complain that Mr. Knott's terror tale has some languid sections in the middle. Mr. Knott has to lay out quite a line of clues to make everything come out straight at the end. But once he gets his traps set, his melodrama is original and remarkably good theatre—quiet in style but tingling with excitement underneath.

* * *

It is the sort of suave make-believe an actor might be willing to pay a small fee to act in on the stage. For the word "play" is a literal description of the sort of acting it requires. Nothing is at stake in "Dial M for Murder" except theatrical hocus-pocus.

Reginald Denham has directed a taut performance that is spoken almost entirely in an ominous monotone. As the most loathsome husband in the world, Mr. Evans acts with a genuine intellectual agility and a spurious amiability that will get him into trouble if he behaves like this outside the theatre. This is a holiday for Mr. Evans, and for the rest of us, too.

John Williams, looking as handsome and impeccable as Antheny Eden, plays one of those London police inspectors who seem to come straight down from Oxford University. Severe but elegant, deferential with just a suspicion of pompousness, Mr. Williams does a capital job, and is doubtless chuckling about it at this moment.

* * *

As the lady wronged by the cleverest of demons, Gusti Huber looks innocent, beautiful and helpless enough to wring the stoniest heart in an audience of males. Anthony Dawson's seedy adventurer is plausible enough to scare the living daylights out of honest people. As an American writer of detective fiction, Richard Derr is tall and handsome, though less sinister than his associates. Mr. Derr looks now and then as though he believes in the character he is playing.

All the action takes place in one set, which is an essential factor in the art of sound theatre merchandise. Peter Larkin has supplied a living-room sufficiently costly and attractive for fashionable homicide, and Noel Taylor has dressed the characters in raiment suitable for civilized crime.

Both the writing and the acting are done to a turn. Mr. Knott and Mr. Evans have managed to squeeze a little youthful fun into our sophisticated theatre.

Daily Mirror

October 30, 1952

'Dial 'M' for Murder' Rings the Bell

By ROBERT COLEMAN

New York has been needing a first-rate melodrama for quite a spell, and it got one last night. It's a London import by Frederick Knott, called "Dial 'M' for Murder." James P. Sherwood, who was associated with the English original, sponsors the American replica at the Plymouth Theatre.

Though the new arrival is not notable for the quality of its writing, it possesses suspense in abundance and offers subtle, amusing touches of characterization. The plotting is ingenious, calculated to keep you perched tensely forward in your seat. The effect is cumulative. After a slow start, it swings into high and maintains its pace under the skilfull direction of Reginald Denham.

The script has to do with a money-mad ex-athlete who plots his wife's murder to obtain her fortune and to avenge himself upon her for having had a momentary affair with an American author of radio mysteries. But that's all we're going to tell you. We resolutely refuse to reveal any of the surprise twists that are to be enjoyed at the Plymouth.

Maurice Evans has temporarily forgotten Ibsen and Shakespeare to give an engrossing performance as the shrewd villain. He has put aside the ringing tone and the broad gesture required by the classics for a restrained, intimate style of acting. But we should have known that he could ably manage the transition, after seeing him in "The Browning Version."

There's a grand performance by John Williams as a suave English police inspector. It's always a pleasure to watch British sleuths at work, particularly when they are impersonated by actors of Williams' stature. They are eminently civilized. They fit perfectly into a drawing room. They seem to be getting nowhere, but they're smarter than you think.

Gusti Huber is excellent as the wife. She handles emotional scenes with telling effect. She even makes you forget her Viennese accent, which wasn't explained for us in the play. Salutes also are due Richard Derr and Anthony Dawson.

"Dial 'M' for Murder" is a constantly absorbing thriller. It holds your attention like a vise. It's a super-melodrama, done with urbanity. If you'd like to test your wits on a cleverly devised murder case, a visit to the Plymouth is imperative. Incidentally, there's a big advance sale, so if you hope to see it soon, you'd better buy your tickets immediately.

Journal-American

October 30, 1952

Should Be With Us For Quite a While

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE elaborately-lauded "Dial 'M' for Murder," a British import starring Maurice Evans, arrived at the Plymouth Theatre last night and should remain there as long as the lease lasts.

It is an enlightened murder melodrama, performed with great distinction by Mr. Evans and his associates, and once it gets under way it will hold you agreeably glued to the chair until the final curtain falls.

Frederick Knott, the author, has succeeded in creating within the limits of a London flat the plausible elements of a perfect crime and has then introduced one of the most engaging inspectors in the history of the game to bring the true culprit to taw.

For this Mr. Knott should be particularly indebted not only to John Williams, who played the part, but also to Reginald Denham, who directed. This is a characterization alone worth the price of the pasteboards.

Weds for Money

The tale transmitted is that of an acknowledged fortune hunter, a gentleman tennis player who has married for money and is now in the process of arranging his wife's murder because of her infidelity with an American author. The husband is too smart to do it himself; rather, he is employing the services of a disreputable college classmate who can be blackmailed into the job.

It is one of those many "foolproof" situations which is of course upset, at long last, by the merest series of circumstances. There was probably no living person on the premises who didn't know what would happen, finally, but it is a tribute to the writing and acting that the customers remained transfixed until the loose ends were all carefully brought together.

One of the age-old faults of any such plot structure is the fact that it is difficult to stop the story long enough for careful characterization.

"Dial 'M'" is no exception. The first act is so filled with exposition about HOW the dread deed is going to be executed that we don't have much interest in the people involved. It also generates an interminable scene in which minor details,

which seem unimportant at the time, are discussed at interminable lengths.

There was a time when I didn't really care how Maurice was going to kill his wife, but I rather hoped he'd do it quickly.

Races Along

But then the whole thing picked up in the second act and raced along, so that pretty soon I was sitting there, gripping the edge of the chair in sheer terror for fear the inspector wouldn't realize that the key in his coat was the same key that Maurice THOUGHT was the key to the apartment but was, actually, Lesgate's . . . etc.

Anyway, it's a hell of a melodrama, forgetting such fine points as characterization and studied suspense.

Maurice Evans, a fugitive from Shakespeare with long experience as noose-bait, was convincingly charming and deceptive as the felon in Bond Street haberdashery; Gusti Huber, as his wife, lent a sort of middle-European pathos to the more violent moments and Richard Derr, as the American lover, acquitted himself with distinction. But the laurels of the evening rest on the balding brow of John Williams, the inspector mentioned earlier in this dispatch.

In my glossary this looks like a hit. Dial "M"—and ask for the nearest ticket broker.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

October 30, 1952

'Dial M for Murder'

By WALTER F. KERR

"DIAL 'M' FOR MURDER," Maurice Evans' new venture at the Plymouth, is one of those happy cat-and-mouse melodramas which establishes a wonderfully innocent belief in its macabre and complicated goings-on. No matter how many times the lights go on and off, no matter how many hollow footsteps are heard to pound along the hallway, no matter how many garden windows are bashed in, the play's sleek surface of credulity never cracks.

Partly this is due to the urbanity with which a sly, restrained, and knowing company set about their author's sinister business. Maurice Evans, lately out of doublet and hose, is pleasantly debonair as a calculating playboy with a mind to murder his wealthy wife. The impudent grin which lights up his face as he informs a seedy college chum that he has been selected to do the deed, the rueful manner in which he bites his lip as he regretfully blackmails the gentleman into geting on with it, and the social grace with which he suggests that the criminal leave no fingerprints around, all work wonders in turning a conventional script into a delightfully plausible adventure in mayhem.

Even when the dialogue is just the sort of hack question-and-answer stuff one expects to find in these mechanical puzzles ("But why are you telling me all this?"), Mr. Evans and his adroit associates gave it easy conviction—shrugging off lightly whatever is stale and shooting intense conviction into every mental twist and turn which a generous playwright has allotted them.

Every bit as much help as Mr. Evans—and, in the crucial last act, even more—is John Williams as a police inspector whose blood is jolly well up. Once the playboy's perfectly planned murder has backfired and the wrong victim been slain, Mr. Williams enters jauntily. He stands about modestly, in his grey pin-stripe suit, fumbling with his hat and wrinkling his mustache to indicate that he is baffled. He mutters a bemused "hm?" as the principal suspect passionately defends himself, and then—along toward eleven o'clock—wraps the whole thing up with a few enchantingly darting and offhand strokes. Mr. Williams is a joy to behold.

Author Frederick Knott must be given credit, too, for the saving grace of lightness. Though his piece is thick with suspicion, counter-suspicion, and deviousness carried to the nineteenth power, and though he engages in a few unlikely dodges—at one point two of the characters rush out to the kitchen to make some flour paste so that the criminal may be left alone—he has a very nice sense of the relieving values of laughter. A radio broadcast which brings us the dour information that a woman is to be hanged for a murder she did not commit is immediately balanced by an ironically cheery weather report. The solution to an ingeniously complicated crime is inadvertently stumbled on by a television writer who has written so many mystery scenarios that he knows all the possible plots.

Reginald Denham has directed with a sure, steady hand, and he gets genuine excitement into the verbal give-and-take as readily as he does into the more obvious business of an attempted strangling. Gusti Huber, as the luckless wife, brings a great deal of sensitivity to the proceedings—she is especially fine in the numb exhaustion of her last scene—and Richard Derr is helpful as her loyal lover.

All in all, "Dial 'M' for Murder" is the kind of show which sets its audience to whispering "Will he find the letter?" in urgent tones, and earnestly thumbing their programs to make sure exactly how much time has elapsed since the preceding scene. It's a holiday for the whodunit fans, and, as such, it couldn't be more welcome.

DAILY NEWS

October 30, 1952

'Dial M for Murder' an Enjoyable Thriller Starring Maurice Evans

By JOHN CHAPMAN

No stage season should be counted complete if it doesn't have a good melodrama listed on the Broadway playbill. The thriller for the 1952-1953 season is "Dial M for Murder," which was offered by a small but slick cast at the Plymouth Theatre last evening.

The cast is headed by Maurice Evans, well known for acting serious gents like Hamlet and King Richard No. 2. In this play, Mr. Evans has toppled off the battlements of England and has become a suave, sly and personable fellow who twice has arranged the perfect murder of his wife. This doubly jeopardized female is very well played by Gusti Huber, who is the best expert at portraying strain and terror since Judith Evelyn undertook the horrors of being Mrs. Manningham in "Angel Street." The man who solves everything at the last minute is John Williams, playing a delightfully casual inspector of the London constabulary.

This One Is Swift.

For many years I have been a devotee of the British whodunit, in fiction or on the stage, but in recent theatre seasons I have been somewhat lonely in enjoying the calm and leisured methods of English crime and detection. "Dial M for Murder" may be better suited to everybody's taste, for this one is swift and suspenseful.

There is no doubt in this play as to who wants the demise of whom. Mr. Evans wants his wife, Miss Huber, out of the way because he only married her for her money. He is not even jealous about her affair with Richard Derr, an American writer of crime fiction for the radio. There can be no greater toleration than this. He simply wants the poor woman dead so he can collect.

There is no mystery about what goes on at the Plymouth Theatre, so there is no harm in revealing that Mr. Evans' first plot to have his wife killed is a beaut. It can't miss—but it does. Instead of the murderer slaying his wife, his wife by happy chance poniards the murderer with a pair of scissors. But this Evans, a cunning devil, sees another chance

One More Chance.

The chance is a logical one: Why not have his old lady convicted of the murder of her murderer and executed according to law? He almost gets away with it. He would, too, if it weren't for the bravery of Mr. Derr and the intelligence of the seemingly casual Inspector Williams. The ending is a neat piece of trickery and is very well staged. All of the play, indeed, is very well staged by Reginald Denham.

I think you'll enjoy "Dial M for Murder"—which was written, by the way, by Frederick Knott as no more than a British television show. It has a good set and some excellent lighting by Peter Larkin, and enough twists of a seemingly simple plot to keep you uncertain of the outcome. Evans makes a thoroughly enjoyable rogue.

"My Darlin' Aida"

The New York Times

October 28, 1952

'My Darlin' Aida' Transports Verdi's Opera to the South of Civil War Times

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Verdi's music in "My Darlin' Aida," put on the Winter Garden last evening, is romantically Italian. Charles Friedman's new libretto is American, with a strong dash of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" seasoning. Despite the beauty of the singing by Dorothy Sarnoff and Elaine Malbin, there is no way of avoiding the fact that the music and the libretto have nothing in common, except, perhaps, a certain shoddiness of style.

Everyone knows, by this time, that Mr. Friedman has shifted Verdi's "Aida" from Memphis, Egypt, in a period that seems pleasantly vague, to Memphis, Tenn., in the period of the War Between the States—an episode still a little too specific for comfort.

* * *

Sooner or later, theatre people will have to abandon this notion that everything exotic can be happily translated in terms of the American South. Although the South is ingenious, it cannot absorb everything that the Yankees have not already nailed down tight. Mr. Friedman's new plot involves a slave insurrection and a good deal of literary bravura that seems obsolete today, especially since his mind is full of cliches. His notion of the formal South has quite a lot of Broadway in it.

As a production, "My Darlin' Aida" is flawless. There is an excellent orchestra under the direction of Franz Allers. No one will be surprised to read that Miss Sarnoff gives a brilliant performance as a singing actress, for she has been distinguishing herself in our midst for some time. The role of Jessica Farrow, a lady of fashion, is more intricate than most of the roles Broadway has given her in the past. But she sings and acts it with stirring virtuosity.

As Aida, the unhappy slave girl, Miss Malbin gives a performance that is equally brilliant. She has put the music and the character together in a fiery and accomplished performance that is completely captivating. In their duets Miss Sarnoff and Miss Malbin are triumphant, and compensate a good deal for the stock tribulations of the book. The male roles are well sung, too, particularly by Howard Jarratt, William Dillard, William Wilderman and Kenneth Schon.

* * *

Under Hassard Short's impeccable supervision, the production is opulent in the best taste. Taking advantage of the rich beauties of the aristocratic Southern tradition, Lemuel Ayers has dressed the women in some gorgeous gowns, and the men look pretty handsome, too, both in evening dress and Confederate uniforms. The scenery is both spacious and lovely. Not being parsimonious, the producer has hired one of the largest casts of the century. Assembled in the big production numbers, his army of singers becomes a most imposing spectacle.

But the formality of the Verdi score keeps pushing both the performance and the libretto into odd situations. As the director, Mr. Friedman is not above military maneuvers that might have come out of the old Hippodrome, and melodramatic crowd scenes equally old-fashioned. Nor is it easy to understand the relationship between Hanya Holm's choreography and the music or the libretto.

Out of respect for the thrilling performances by Miss Sarnoff and Miss Malbin, and of the beauties of the production, it would be pleasant to salute "My Darlin' Aida" as a musical achievement. But basically the enterprise is a solecism. The Verdi score has brought out the worst in Mr. Friedman's literary style.

"MY DARLIN' AIDA"

Musical play by Charles Friedman, based on Guiseppe Verdi's "Aida"; music by Verdi; staged by Mr. Friedman; scenery and costumes by Lemuel Ayres; choreography by Hanya Holm; presented by Robert L. Joseph at the Winter Garden Theatre, October 27, 1952. The cast:

Rumford	William Wilderman
Mayor Brad Sourby	Stanley Carson
Aida	Elaine Malbin (evenings) Eileen Schauler (matinees)
Raymond Demarest	William Olvis or Howard Jarratt
Jason	Alonzo Bosan
Morning Star	Lavinia Williams
Lolly	Olive Moorefield
Wheat	George Fisher
Frog	John Fleming
Liz	Fredye Marshall
Rebecca	Billie Allen
Lucy	Joyce Sellinger
Yancey Hoyt	William Sutherland
Jessica Farrow	Dorothy Sarnoff (evenings) Bette Dubro (matinees)
Gen. Farrow	Kenneth Schon
Choir Soloist	Theresa Green
Sis	Ruth Anne Fleming
Dolly	Ruth McVayne
Bonnie	Sue Dorris
Maggie	Muriel Birckhead
Aggie	Martha Flynn
Laurie	Lola Fisher
Mary	Ruth Schumacher
Nellie	Mary Ann Tomlinson
Bettie	Jane Copeland
Onnie	Carol Jones
Magician	Gordon Hamilton
Mrs. Sourby	Jo Anne Taylor
Howie	Walter Kelvin
Bull	Edward Wellman
Steve	Robert Busch
Hutch	Thornton Marker
Adam Brown	William Dillard
Flower	Jacqueline Hairston
Susie	Gloria Davy
Lilly	Charlotte Holloman
Pork	Ned Wright

New York Post

October 28, 1952

By Richard Watts Jr.

'Aida' as a Drama of the Civil War

Although Charles Friedman has had some trouble dramatically in changing the background of Verdi's "Aida" from ancient Egypt to the America of the Civil War, his production of "My Darlin' Aida," as he calls it, which opened at the Winter Garden last night, has so much pictorial beauty and theatrical excitement about it, and it is so splendidly sung and played by Elaine Malbin and Dorothy Sarnoff, that it emerges as a stage work of remarkable interest. The presentation, I think, leaves considerable to be desired in the writing, but its weaknesses in that respect are more than atoned for by the richness and imagination of the staging.

If you have been reading the newspaper theatrical sections of late, you know what Mr. Friedman has tried to do with the text of the original opera. His Aida is now a beautiful slave girl on the plantation of General Farrow—you'll remember that he used to be Pharaoh—near Memphis, Tennessee, in the first year of the Civil War, and she is loved by the dashing Captain Demarest, of the Confederate Army, who is engaged to the General's daughter, who is no longer Amneris but Jessica. There is a secret hooded organization resembling the Ku Klux Klan, and a slave revolt, and it ends in tragedy.

Plot Values

It should very quickly be added that Mr. Friedman is concerned with capturing the original dramatic values of the opera and not in any attempt at parody. And it is a virtue of his adaptation that it does deserve to be taken seriously as drama and succeeds in giving his musical play its share of narrative interest. But it is my impression that "My Darlin' Aida"—which strikes me as a rather unhappy title—must depend for its chief effectiveness on its pictorial and lyric values and not on any distinction as a book. Its ornate and formal dialogue and its heavy plot manipulations are decided handicaps.

These matters do have a tendency to get in the work's way and give it a sometimes heavy-going air, particularly in the second act. But I think that its virtues more than atone for its obvious weaknesses. There is, for one important thing, the beautiful and heroic score and, especially as sung so brilliantly by Miss Malbin and Miss Sarnoff, it comes across the footlights with enormous success. Then, there is the pictorial brilliance of Lemuel Ayers' sets and costumes, which are not only colorfully beautiful but have a dramatic effectiveness of their own. Visually, the musical play is an invariable delight.

The Dances

It has been staged with a fine liveliness, too, and Hanya Holm has created some incidental dances that are of helpfulness and imagination. There is, notably, a number in which the slaves pretend to be holding a dance of their own, while the whites from the plantation are hunting down the leaders of the revolt, and it has been staged in a manner to provide excellent suspense and dramatic interest. Even though the maneuvers of the narrative are frequently clumsy and ineffectual, the imagination and beauty of the production are distinguished enough to make them seem of minor importance.

I didn't think the men of the cast were of any notable assistance, but the two women could hardly have been improved upon. Miss Malbin, in the title role, not only sings beautifully but offers a glowing and lovely romantic performance in a genuinely triumphant portrayal, and Miss Sarnoff plays and sings the role of the unhappy villainess with striking power, distinction and credible sympathy to achieve one of the eminent successes of her career. The choral singing is of help at all times. "My Darlin' Aida" may be something of a theatrical stunt but it is an impressive one.

Journal American

October 28, 1952

Huge, Gorgeous And Grotesque

By JOHN McCLAIN

MOST of the immortal music of Verdi's "Aida" has been appropriated by Charles Friedman, fitted out with a new book and lyrics and transferred to Memphis, Tenn., during the time of the Civil War. As such it is called "My Darlin' Aida," and was unveiled at the Winter Garden Theatre last night under the banner of Robert L. Joseph.

It is sung with lustre and great charm by a highly professional cast which includes Dorothy Sarnoff, Elaine Malbin, Howard Jarratt, William Dillard and two or three thousand (it seemed) fellow vocalists; it is given expensive settings and dressings by Lemuel Ayers and it has been lit and supervised by no less a person than Hassard Short. It is gargantuan, gorgeous and extremely grotesque. One can't help wondering why it was done.

It didn't seem to me that the job of transplanting Verdi from the Nile to the Confederacy served any purpose. In making the switch Friedman had to dream up a story that feebly attempted to keep the elements of the opera, but certainly added nothing to it.

While I do not pretend to be an authority on Verdi's original Italian lyrics, I think it is safe to say that Friedman's new ones do not appreciably enhance the music, either.

A New Problem

In straight opera you know the plot and through the years you have gained a fair knowledge of what the familiar arias are about, even though you don't understand them.

But in "Darlin'" you have a whole new problem: trying to cope with a nonsensical story and at the same time attempting to figure out just what the tenors and sopranos are saying when they're straining for that high note. If one is determined to do "Aida," why not faithfully translate the original?

However, accepting the Friedman-Joseph venture as a fact, there are many kind words to be spoken for all concerned. It is magnificently mounted and the choral numbers, directed by Robert Shaw, are superb.

Dorothy Sarnoff, recently of "The King and I," sings the role of the lovelorn Southern belle with charm and competence and Elaine Malbin, a mere sprout from the New York City Opera, handles the difficult role of "Aida" with professional diligence. She has a remarkably natural voice and an effective stage personality.

Lost Interest

Howard Jarratt, as the hero, was required to behave like no known human being, living or dead, and I'm afraid this made me lose interest in him early in the proceedings.

The large orchestra, directed by Franz Allers, lent a fresh and agreeably enthusiastic quality to Verdi's great score.

Getting back to the point of what demand there is for opera in modern or semi-modern dress I would guess that there is quite a large public who would go to see something that retains the qualities of the original yet adds current ideas and production techniques. I think, for instance, "Carmen Jones" had it; I don't think "Darlin'" does.

New York Herald Tribune

October 28, 1952

'My Darlin' Aida'

By WALTER F. KERR

CHARLES FRIEDMAN has transplanted Verdi's "Aida" to the banks of the Mississippi, and Robert L. Joseph has set the production up, at a cost of nearly three hundred thousand dollars, at the Winter Garden. There may be some questions raised about Mr. Friedman's part in the adventure, but no one is going to ask where they spent the three hundred thousand.

As a spectacle, "My Darlin' Aida" is a dazzling show. Lemuel Ayers has devised some gargantuan splendors to fill the vast stage of the Winter Garden. In addition to the conventional columns and chandeliers of the old South, there are any number of inventive and haunting images. There is a tiny skeleton church set against the greens and blacks of a moonlit graveyard. There is a levee in the noonday sun that is alive with reds, oranges and blues. There is a stunning boudoir —chartreuse, this time—and a drawing room in bronze and coral brocades. For contrast, there are the dark and brooding slave quarters, and, while the show as a whole may be a little long on Spanish moss—the actors were getting snarled in it every once in a while last night—the over-all production plan is bursting with visual excitement.

Color is used dramatically, not only in the settings but in Mr. Ayers' sometimes blindingly brilliant costumes and in the lighting with which Hassard Short has bathed this sumptuous charivari. To add to the evening's theatrical effectiveness, choreographer Hanya Holm has pounded some pace and fire into her two opportunities for dance, and Robert Shaw has organized a robust and ringing chorus.

It would be misleading, though, to suggest that in adapting Verdi's opera to an American Civil War background Mr. Friedman had really succeeded in retaining the lyrical impact of the original or in finding a new and native statement of its emotional power. What he has done, story-wise, is this: Aida has become a plantation slave, servant to the imperious Jessica Farrow; her lover is Raymond Demarest, a dashing young Southerner who has just earned his army commission and who is officially betrothed to Jessica. The outlines of the opera quickly adjust themselves to the familiar problems of miscegenation. At the end of the evening a bloody Demarest is tied to a tombstone and flogged by a red-robed Klan, while Aida dies of bullet wounds in the little church near by.

The situations are Americanized easily enough. It is in the uncomfortably plain and platitudinous lyrics—and, worse yet, in the melodramatic dialogue—that Mr. Friedman fails to do justice to Verdi or to his own commendable ambitions.

Since Mr. Friedman has himself acknowledged his debt, by way of inspiration, to Oscar Hammerstein's "Carmen Jones," comparisons may be permissible. In adapting Bizet to the milieu, and the speech patterns, of the American Negro, Hammerstein had discovered a genuinely native, gently poetic idiom which spoke simply and directly of emotional truths. Mr. Friedman's ear is not so sensitive, nor his feelings for words so supple.

His lyrical form is not even clearly defined. Every so often 'ma,' or 'pa,' or an idiomatic verb form slips in ("I wants to pray"), but most of the time his singers are enunciating a startlingly precise grammar-school English ("You're hurting me, father!") or trilling out a locution like "I don't want to be possessed by madness."

And when the author does try his hand at a poetic image, it comes down like a fist-literal, determined, labored:

"Go to your own pasture!"
"Your is greener."
"Yes, but yours has a white fence around it."

The result of this verbal flatness is that Verdi's musical line is rarely matched, and the melodramatic plotting which we are usually ready to forgive in an opera becomes garishly accented. There is a great deal of grappling over knives, grabbing up of cloaks for runaway exits, and there is even a moment in which two Simon Legrees stand with blacksnake whips over a quaking fugitive. We cannot quite ignore the fact that the show rather frequently looks, and sounds, like a road company "Tom" show.

The women in the company perform brilliantly. Elaine Malbin is attractive, and in excellent voice, as Aida, and Dorothy Sarnoff is a stunning Rebecca. Together they build the first-act "Letter Duet" to a tremendous crescendo, and Miss Malbin is equally striking in a second-act aria, "Alone." Unhappily, Howard Jarrett is an uncertain and posturing Demarest, and what little emotional life the libretto might possess is filtered away through a wooden performance. William Dillard, as Aida's father, is far more satisfying, and he makes portions of the first-act finale electrifying.

"My Darlin' Aida" is almost never a moving experience, but the brocade, the silver, and the crystal —not to mention the music—may make it up to you. The Winter Garden is ablaze with bright hues.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

October 28, 1952

'Darlin' Aida' Tops as Spectacle

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Nothing quite like "My Darlin' Aida" has ever hit Broadway before. Transferring the score and violent emotional spirit of the Verdi grand opera to the South in Civil War times, Charles Friedman has conceived a musical of such passion and beauty that it leaves the listener quite limp.

The famed Verdian triangle here involves a beautiful Southern plantation-owning heiress, the army officer who has been raised by her parents, and a girl he loves who is a mulatto and a slave.

Masked Riders.

The frankly hair-raising story, so suitable to the turbulent music, involves a society of masked night riders and a slave rebellion, instigated by the father of Aida, the slave girl. The great virtue of this setting and subject is that the sweeping conflicts and all the impetuous loves and hates are thoroughly understandable to anyone with the faintest smattering of American history.

The show is presented with a lavishness that has been all but unheard of in many seasons. Lemuel Ayers has used cascades of hanging moss to plant the Southern atmosphere. Against it and through it are scenes in a great pillared mansion with dimly twinkling chandeliers. There is a delicate boudoir of rose dotted net which opens into a vast French-windowed sitting room. There is a wildly golden dock for the returning soldiers, a rich brocaded sitting room, and a gloomy graveyard.

The costumes take every advantage of the settings, as the jaunty plaids of the slaves, the spangles of tumblers, and the satins of the ladies all create their own emotional effects.

Anyone who knows the original "Aida" will be constantly startled and delighted at the way the familiar airs bowl over any resistance to the changes. To the uninitiated, it will be quite plain why Verdi's stuff lives so persistently all over the world. Scene after scene in this boiling-blooded story knocks the breath out of you.

When you consider that there is no vestige of humor in the original, the comedy influence seems ingeniously introduced, if spare. There are flashes of impudence among the kittenish servants, and delightful dances, usually to spontaneous percussion effects, which brighten the scene immeasurably through Hanya Holm's familiar ingenuity. The triumphal return of the Army is a riotous festival of motion.

Dorothy Sarnoff and Elaine Malbin are both starred, as indeed they should be.

Role With Majesty.

Miss Sarnoff plays the rejected land-owner with real majesty, and a consistent emotional force that is downright spellbinding. She is magnificent looking in the grand costumes, and whips the show along like a great chariot whenever she is on stage.

Miss Malbin startles with her musical prowess, singing through the evening with vehemence and security she has never revealed previously. She supports the tortured situations with conviction.

Howard Jarrett handled the difficult tenor lines most capably, and William Wilderman is excellent as head of the Night Riders, singing beautifully.

William Dillard as the chief rebel provides one of the evening's most unforgettable scenes when he holds back the crowd with his pistol, and Kenneth Schon is impressive as the general.

It would be silly to claim "My Darlin' Aida" was perfect. It slows down in the second act with redundant social consciousness and there are moments when the lines and lyrics do not entirely elucidate complex situations. Purists may start at hearing "March On for Tennessee" where they are used to "Ritorna Vincitor," or "Hear Me, Oh Lord" for "Numi Pieta."

More important is the fabulously rich and beautiful production of a show that is an emotional mammoth compared to the ants of every day theater.

DAILY NEWS

October 28, 1952

'My Darlin' Aida' Is An Impressive And Beautiful Opera Adaptation

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The tragedy of Aida and Radames which Antonio Ghislanzoni wrote for the composer, Giuseppe Verdi, has been made into a visually stunning, artistically impressive and emotionally effective musical play titled "My Darlin' Aida." It opened last evening at the Winter Garden and the first audience was stirred to cheers and tears.

The title, "My Darlin' Aida," sounds frisky, but it isn't. It is the first phrase of an immortal love song, "Celeste Aida" — a song which now is sung by a young Confederate captain from Tennessee to tell of his ardor for a mulatto slave girl. The story remains the sombre tale of a hopeless love; Charles Friedman, the adapter, has treated it with respect and skill, and on the stage of a musical comedy house it is profoundly affecting.

A Long Fight.

Respect and skill are to be found all through this production. The acting, as well as the singing, of such fine people as Dorothy Sarnoff, Elaine Malbin, Howard Jarratt and William Dillard, is admirable. Lemuel Ayers' plantation settings are brilliantly imagined and gorgeously executed, and his costumes are a perfect combination of lavishness and good taste. The ensemble numbers have been staged by an old master of big shows, Hassard Short, and Hanya Holm has contributed two of her best ballets. A very fine orchestra under the direction of Franz Allers treats the Verdi music glowingly, and Hans Spialek's arrangements for this orchestra—which is naturally smaller than the one at the Met—are a fine adaptation of a grand opera into a musical play.

Friedman, who staged the Oscar Hammerstein 2d version of "Carmen," "Carmen Jones," has been trying to get "My Darlin' Aida" on a stage for five years. In Robert L. Joseph he has found a producer with good taste, much money behind him, and considerable courage. I hope this courage wins the reward it deserves, and that theatregoers will find this profoundly sentimental tale satisfying.

The story is of Aida, a plantation slave, and the love she shares with Capt. Raymond Demarest (Radames). Its time is the outbreak of the Civil War. Young Demarest is unhappily pledged to Jessica Farrow, daughter of the plantation owner (Pharaoh). Aida's stepfather, Adam Brown, comes back from the North via the underground to head an uprising of the slaves, and Demarest becomes involved in it. The plot is discovered; Brown is shot dead, Aida is wounded, and Demarest is fatally whipped by a gathering of masked and hooded Knights of the White Cross. The lovers die together in a rickety old Negro church, while outside, in the graveyard, Jessica prays for the repose of Demarest's soul.

Top-flight Cast.

As I've said, Ayers' scenes are magnificent, ranging from the opulence of a great plantation house to the ominously brooding environs of the church. Last night's Aida was Miss Malbin, and this young opera singer has progressed far as an artist. Both her singing and her acting are splendid —and so is the equal artistry of Miss Sarnoff as the jilted Jessica Farrow. Jarratt, too, is excellent as Demarest, and Dillard plays the rebellious slave, Brown, with exciting authority. There are many other good performances, including those by William Wilderman, Olive Moorefield and Kenneth Schon.

There will be alternate singers in principal roles: Eileen Schauler will sing Aida at matinees, and at matinees the Jessica will be Bette Dubro; William Olvis will alternate with Jarratt on a schedule not yet announced.

I hope to write more soon about the production and its details—about Miss Holm's Negro dance, the dramatic effectiveness of many scenes, and the grace and clarity of Friedman's libretto and lyrics.

Daily Mirror

October 28, 1952

'My Darlin' Aida' Falls Short of the Mark

By ROBERT COLEMAN

One must admire Robert L. Joseph's daring in presenting a paraphrase of Verdi's "Aida" at the Winter Garden last evening. Joseph is a young man of courage. He seeks to offer only works of superior quality. Still, we doubt the wisdom of the venture. We doubt that "My Darlin' Aida," the new arrival, has achieved the standards that Joseph and a host of gifted associates intended.

Verdi was commissioned by the Khedive of Egypt to compose "Aida" to celebrate the opening of the Suez Canal. Antonio Ghislanzoni wrote the book after material suggested by Egyptologist Mariette Bey. The material is exotic, and the music oriental in flavoring. Now, Charles Friedman has moved the plot from Egypt to a plantation near Memphis, Tenn., during the Civil War.

And, frankly, we don't think that Rhadames, Aida, the Ethiopian king, the Egyptian Pharaoh and Amneris are very much at home in the Deep South. Rhadames is now a captain in the Confederate Army. Aida and her kingly father, slaves. Pharaoh, General Farrow. And Amneris, Jessica Farrow, heiress to a big estate.

The music they sing, even though arranged admirably by Hans Spialek, is incongruous in the new locale.

Elaine Malbin, as Aida; Howard Jarratt, as Captain Demarest, and Dorothy Sarnoff, as Jessica Farrow—the angles of the eternal triangle—sing the Spialek orchestration less well than you are likely to hear the original sung at the Met. But they act the roles better.

Lemuel Ayers has designed the most gorgeous sets and costumes we've glimpsed in a long while. Franz Allers worked wonders in the orchestra pit, as did Robert Shaw with the chorus.

Hanya Holm has been less successful with the choreography, though we must admit that it has more distinction than the downright silly steps we usually get in opera houses. And Hassard Short has supervised the production with taste, though he might have relieved Friedman's book of some cliches.

The first-nighters embraced "My Darlin' Aida" with enthusiasm. Their cheers and applause vibrated the Winter Garden's rafters. One member of the audience near us was overheard to say: "I attended 'Aida' at the Met last season, and I like this ever so much better. I can understand it." But it comes down to this. We don't think Met subscribers will share her estimate. Nor do we think average playgoers will relish it.

Personally, we'll take our "Aida" straight.

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"The Pirates of Penzance"

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

October 28, 1952

'Pirates of Penzance' Presented In Chartock Troupe's 2d Week

By Paul V. Beckley

The "Pirates of Penzance," with which the S. M. Chartock company began its second week last night at the Hellinger, came off brightly enough, despite a certain off-handedness in the opening act as though the singers were enjoying Gilbert & Sullivan rather than playing this pert example of their operatic satire. With the appearance of Martyn Green on the stage as Maj. Gen. Stanley, a role he played with the precise compound of bombast and warmth that made it satire and not burlesque, the whole troupe seemed to take heart.

From there on in, things were livelier and funnier, even though Robert Rounseville as Frederick, the pirate apprentice, seemed never quite able to make up his mind what to do with his hands. However, it is only fair to note that Mr. Rounseville's voice is fine enough to make his hands seem not too important.

Robert Eckles as the frightened Edward, sergeant of police, backed up by his squad of policemen, proved one of the high lights of the production. He (and they) delivered the song, "When the foeman bares his steel," with a subtlety and conviction that made the lines seem fresh, after all.

It seems more likely that, having gotten enthusiastic in the later stages of last night's performance, the troupe may be expected to continue so during the remainder of the week.

"THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE"

Operetta with words by W. S. Gilbert and music by Arthur Sullivan; staged by S. M. Chartock; scenery by Ralph Alswang; costumes by Peggy Morrison; musical conductor Lehman Engel; presented by Mr. Chartock at the Mark Hellinger Theatre, October 27, 1952. The cast:

Samuel.....Frank Rogier
Frederick...Robert Rounseville
Ruth.....Ella Halman
Richard.....Joseph Macaulay
Kate.....Mary Roche
Edith.....Lillian Murphy
Isabel.....Shirley Pringle
Mabel.....Dorothy MacNeil
Maj. Gen. Stanley..Martyn Green
Edward.....Robert Eckles

The New York Times

October 28, 1952

'Pirates of Penzance' Arrives in Port

S. M. Chartock's new Gilbert and Sullivan company, which seemed to be having some trouble last week in "The Mikado," appeared more comfortable in its offering of "The Pirates of Penzance" at the Mark Hellinger last night.

Certainly, there can be no question that Mr. Chartock has assembled a company of fine singers. The principals can carry the lovely Sullivan melodies with grace or dignity, or both, as the occasion may require. What still is needed is that intangible quality of style and a surer crispness in the direction. But with care and meticulous attention to detail, this will come to pass and the hopes that were expressed last week that Mr. Chartock would yet realize his aspiration seems a little closer to realization this morning.

Honors in the current production are fairly evenly divided. Martyn Green as the major general does not have as much to do in "The Pirates of Penzance" as he has in several of the other operettas, but the rendition of his autobiography in the first act is always a pleasure. Long ago the sages undoubtedly gave up trying to figure out the secret of his tongue's agility in that humorous patter song, and this reviewer has no intention of failing with the rest. Let it go simply that Mr. Green probably could do as well with the lyrics even standing on his head.

In Dorothy MacNeil, who is singing the role of Mabel, the company has a most attractive soprano. Her voice is sweet and it carries well. Add to this the happy asset that she knows what she is doing as an actress. She does not trust only the sweetness of her voice, but she also has the looks and the feeling for the words, no minor assets.

Robert Rounseville is a handsome pirate apprentice, and his tenor voice is clear and strong. Joseph Macaulay plays the Pirate King with just about the proper mock bravado; Ella Halman, as always, is just right as the practical maid of all work, and Robert Eckles does a splendid job as the police sergeant. A veteran of Gilbert and Sullivan, this moon-faced fellow gives an elegant impersonation of a warrior who does not have his heart in his work.

The production is gaily costumed by Peggy Morrison, but Ralph Alswang's sets seem somewhat lost on the huge stage of the Hellinger. That theatre, large as it is, indeed, does little to help Lehman Engel's orchestra. Acoustically, it seems that the music is muffled and thin in spite of a strong complement of musicians in the pit. Once or twice, even the singers appeared handicapped when they stepped slightly back from the front of the stage.

However, as with Gilbert and Sullivan, for whom all is always well at the end, the sum of last evening with the good-hearted pirate band from Penzance comes out on the right side of the ledger.

L. F.

New York Post

October 28, 1952

By Vernon Rice

'Pirates' Gives Hope for New Troupe

After a faltering start last week with "The Mikado," S. M. Chartock's Gilbert and Sullivan Company is giving itself and the audience a better time with its second try, "The Pirates of Penzance," which opened last night at the Mark Hellinger to play through Saturday evening. The claim of several devotees that the troupe has the makings of a proficient G and S ensemble became more apparent with this operetta.

For one thing, Martyn Green, the refugee from the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company who is giving his talents as leading comedian and production consultant, has his health and himself more stable in the role of Major General Stanley. His Ko-Ko was stuffed with penicillin due to a heavy cold brought on by fatigue. It also was out of key with the playing of the rest of the cast.

Back In Form

Major General Stanley is in the familiar pattern of controlled style and graceful wit in the Chartock company we knew in Green's D'Oyly Carte days. With easy manner, Green went into Stanley's famous patter song soon after his entrance, and it was with relief to find him back in fine form.

If Green was an important link in the British group, he is the backbone of this company, as was evident last evening, and no amount of pulse-taking, temperature-readings and supervised rest should be spared to see that he doesn't ever again get in the state he was opening night.

Another whose health should be watched is conductor Lehman Engel. He seemed to have been working extremely hard last night in the orchestra pit with his multiple cues. To have him not there to guide the musicians and singers would be a great misfortune.

Sturdy with physical stamina seem to be droll Robert Eckles as the Sergeant of Police, Ella Halman, another import from the D'Oyly Carte, playing the nurse Ruth, and Joseph Macaulay in the role of the comically fierce Pirate King.

In Different Keys

Generally, coloratura sopranos have the same maddening effect on me as frogs at mating time, though they sing in different keys, but Dorothy MacNeil's easy trilling and fluting, as Mabel, commanded my attention. She had a head start, of course, with one of the best songs for that kind of singing, "Poor Wandering One," but there has been many a girl to mess it up.

Robert Rounseville has a pleasant enough voice to sing Frederick, the boy who raises a perplexing problem because he was born on Feb. 29. His acting, however, is of the quality which always brings up the question with so many other leading men in operettas, what to do with tenors when they aren't singing?

In due time, Chartock, as director, will have to face that problem. He's had so many others he's had to work on, that he'll doubtlessly get around to Rounseville.

With Ralph Alswang's serviceable sets for touring, Peggy Morrison's period costumes and the troupe's industrious and harmonious chorus, this production of "The Pirates of Penzance" gives hope for Chartock's Gilbert and Sullivan Company.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

October 28, 1952

Chartock 'Pirates' Glitters

By ROBERT BAGAR.

There was a surprisingly good performance of the Gilbert and Sullivan "Pirates of Penzance" at the Mark Hellinger Theater last night. This, the second in the G&S series of productions by S. M. Chartock, shone brightly all through, thanks to its musicianly qualities, in which respect Savoyard companies, barring the original one, do not always illumine the sky.

Good singing by the soloists and the chorus and the presence of the brilliant Martyn Green, made the evening most enjoyable. I found especially agreeable the performers' mock naivete, their excellent diction, the arch though not too exaggerated delivery of still very funny lines.

Professional Air.

The production profited handsomely, of course, by all such elements. And yet, I missed something; the ebullient spirit, the flair and sparkle of the D'Oyly Carte presentations.

There was a very professional air about last night's spoofing. It was good fun, too. Yet, the stage ought to have had more movement, more physical enthusiasm by the male chorus singers in Act I.

No Waste Gestures.

The Major General Stanley of Martyn Green is ever a delight to observe. This man doesn't waste a gesture, an expression. Everything he does seems right. Yet the spectator, knowing full well the satirical aspects of the libretto and, surely, the score and, therefore the general spuriousness of the entire business, finds it difficult not to sympathize with Stanley in his imitation sadness.

Robert Rounseville's fine voice, his manly figure and amiable simplicity make him, to my mind, the perfect Apprentice Pirate, Frederick.

There were other commendable artists in last night's show—Dorothy MacNeil, for instance, who sang beautifully in the role of Mabel, Frederick's love interest. Besides, she is a most graceful personage and a refined singer. Lillian Murphy, another Stanley daughter, also contributed much to the picture.

Ella Halman, an admired member of the D'Oyly Carte troupe, sang with her special ability the role of Ruth, piratical maid of all work. Joseph Macauley's Pirate King, Frank Rogier's Samuel, Robert Eckles' very funny Sergeant of Police, were the other able performers.

Lehman Engel conducted efficiently and cleanly and with much appreciation of the slyness and wit of this durable parody.

Journal American

October 28, 1952

First Class Production By an Expert Company

By Miles Kastendieck

GILBERT and Sullivan fans may be reassured. S. M. Chartock's company at the Mark Hellinger Theatre hit their stride last night in the "Pirates of Penzance." They played and sang with zest and they achieved a musical quality comparable to the best efforts of any company within memory.

With a first-class performance, the eternal spontaneity of the work itself exerted its irresistible pull. Gilbert's rippling, genteel comedy retains its archness. Sullivan's enchanting tunes, so discreetly set, lose none of their sparkle. The marriage of words and notes remains one of the glories of English heritage.

An American exuberance pervades this presentation. It may not have the refinement or the the delicious exaggeration of the traditional English version, but it has a straightforwardness that is quite disarming. Chartock's staging has the essential style without going cute.

Operatic Calibre

The real strength of the show as a whole is its high musical standard. With Robert Rounseville as Frederick and Dorothy MacNeil as Mabel it attains operatic calibre, as it should.

The singers of the leading roles—Joseph MacAuley as the Pirate King and Frank Rogier as his lieutenant— also have the vocal substance befitting their station. Ella Halman as Ruth does not quite reach their level. The male chorus comes into its own in the second act.

Most likely Lehman Engel is responsible for the quality of the performance. His direction of the ensembles has precision and that of the orchestra style. He could profit by having a larger orchestra.

With due respect to these accomplishments, however, it is the inimitable Martyn Green who unifies the performance. His "Modern Major General" supplies the essence of stability as well as the consummation of Gilbert and Sullivan art. Robert Eckles showed that he, too, is firmly in the tradition as the Sergeant of Police.

One of the distinct pleasures of the evening is the diction. It is possible to understand almost every word of the text sung, a feat that all singers should note. If memory serves there are not quite so many encores given when the bobbies take over the second act. Their dumb show qualifies as an ingenious touch of direction.

The tender-hearted pirates are as naive as ever. The hittunes are as beguiling and the Gilbertian wit is as pointed. This perennial favorite is in good hands.

DAILY NEWS

October 28, 1952

'Pirates' Sing The Old Song

By ROBERT SYLVESTER

Constabulary duty was being done being done, and pirates—pardon, piRAYtes—were up to the usual romantic skull-duggery on the stage of the Mark Hellinger last night as S. M. Chartock's Gilbert and Sullivan Co. continued the repertory with 'The Pirates of Penzance."

Against the predominantly American supporting cast, Martyn Green (a lammister from the D'Oyly Carte troupe) is a somewhat inaudible but extremely fast-talking model of a model major general. As production consultant, Mr. Green has "The Pirates" bouncing on and off in lively fashion and he knows, of course, where all weak and strong points are, whether said points are being made by pirates or constabulary.

Dorothy MacNeill and Lillian Murphy are pretty and charming as the General's daughters who are tempted by pirates and "a divinity in the vicinity." Joseph Macaulay and Ella Halman are properly rugged but human as pirate leaders. Robert Eckles is the timorous and tuneful sergeant of Constables. Robert Rounseville is handsome as ever, and full of masculine song, as the piratical apprentice who has a paradoxical problem with his birthday.

"The Mikado"

Journal American

October 21, 1952

Eager, Bright Cast Needs Experience

By JOHN McCLAIN

S. M. CHARTOCK and Martyn Green, a prominent fugitive from the old D'Oyly Carte company, have together assembled a very acceptable Gilbert and Sullivan company which opened at the Mark Hellinger Theatre last night with "The Mikado."

With the exception of Ella Halman, also a D'Oyly Carter, the cast is almost solidly American—representing for the first time in many years a truly professional venture of such stature in this country.

There were obvious shortcomings, here and there, and a sense of insecurity in spots, but for a fledgling group it was a laudable effort and in many ways a bright departure from the rather static and identical productions offered, year after year by the British company.

The chorus, for instance, performs with greater precision and it is almost always possible to hear the words of the lyrics. The settings are brighter and more fanciful, and the costumes are correspondingly bizarre.

Should Improve

Robert Rounseville, an Attleboro, Mass., lad, sings the Nanki-Poo role with strength and assurance, and if his acting was somewhat mechanical at times it can be forgiven by the fact that he's only had a few weeks to acquaint himself with this and the other enormous tenor roles in the repertory to follow. He should improve immeasurably as the season progresses.

Frank Rogier, as Pish-Tush, appeared to have the best voice of the evening and the relaxed mastery of his part, born of years of experience in opera. Joseph Macaulay, as the Mikado, and Robert Eckles, as Pooh-Bah, creditably rounded out the male vocal section.

Lillian Murphy, as Yum-Yum, has a fresh and accurate voice and is quite a dish as well. Her big moment with the ever-charming "The Sun And I," stopped the show successfully for several encores.

Ella Halman, in the thankless part of Katisha, blasted her way through the less distinguished melodies allotted her and managed to remain suitably repulsive to afford comedy relief.

Dorothy MacNeil handled her small singing part with distinction, especially the delightful Roundelay in which she joined Rounseville, Miss Murphy and Rogier. This particular number was a high point of the festivities.

As Great as Always

The whole evening could scarely survive, however, without the exhaustive services of Martyn Green, as The Lord High Executioner.

He is onstage almost all the time with his same old bag of tricks: the protruding toe bit, the breakaway fan, the small contortions and acrobatic feats.

I've been laughing at them as long as I can remember and I laughed again last night. And I was just as moved by his delightfully small faltering delivery of "Tit Willow." It would be hard to imagine Gilbert and Sullivan without him.

Chartock has here a callow and spotty company, but they're eager and bright—what they need principally is experience. Be interesting to see them a year hence.

"THE MIKADO"

Operetta with words by W. S. Gilbert and music by Arthur Sullivan; costumes by Peggy Morrison; musical direction by Lehman Engel; settings by Ralph Alswang; staged and presented by S. M. Chartock at the Mark Hellinger Theatre, October 20, 1952. The cast:

Nanki-Poo...Robert Rounseville
Go-To.....Radley Flynn
Pish-Tush.....Frank Rogier
Pooh-Bah.....Robert Eckles
Ko-Ko.....Martyn Green
Yum-Yum.....Lillian Murphy
Pitti-Sing.....Mary Roche
Peep-Bo.....Dorothy MacNeil
Katisha.....Ella Halman
Mikado of Japan.....
Joseph Macaulay

DAILY NEWS

October 21, 1952

Chartock's New G & S Company Will Be Good When It Cuts Loose

By JOHN CHAPMAN

I think S. M. Chartock will have a good Gilbert and Sullivan company for touring purposes, once he allows his people to cut loose a bit. In its first performance last evening—it was "The Mikado," at the Mark Hellinger Theatre—the outfit seemed to be looking over its shoulder at the first and best D'Oyly Carte company which came here many years ago, and to be worrying lest it do something bad.

Perhaps this was because the company includes Martyn Green, one of the best of the D'Oyly Carters, and Ella Halman, another of the best. Perhaps it was because Chartock himself, who has had several G&S troupes of varying quality, was determined to make this one the fanciest and artiest of all. Whatever the cause or causes, the first "Mikado" was pretty sleepy.

Yet it should not have been. Lehman Engel, the musical director, has assembled a fine small orchestra which performs the Sullivan music with love, charm and delicacy. Robert Rounseville is a capital Nanki-Poo with an admirable light tenor voice—just right for all the Sullivan tenor parts. Three excellent and attractive singers—Lillian Murphy, Mary Roche and Dorothy MacNeil—are the maids from school, and Miss Murphy does a winning job of singing "The Sun and I." Joseph Macaulay, an old hand at a music-show, is not haunted by the memory of Darrell Fancourt and gives the role of the Mikado a most interesting performance.

Green Out of Balance.

Last evening Macaulay and Miss Halman were the ones who were really singing Gilbert and Sullivan. They were incisive, poised, amusing and unworried. Green, the star of the show in his familiar role of Ko-Ko, seemed occasionally to be off somewhere in a private performance of his own. He was cutting up and catching flies while everybody else was going by the book. Green is, of course, one of the best of the living Savoyards—experienced, certain and undoubtedly funny as he bounces around on his airfoam legs while he sings "Here's a How-de-do."

But Green should remember that the perfect G & S performance requires unity. If one player is permitted to cut up a bit, so should the others in the same spirit. The ideal Gilbert and Sullivan performance is all of a piece—either restrained and precise or gay and frisky.

Chartock and his followers should make up their minds what they want to be. They have the stuff to make a good company. The men and women of the chorus sing admirably. The costumes are okay. I'd like to see everybody try to be gay and frisky instead of a respectful imitation of the old D'Oyly Carte group.

The New York Times

October 21, 1952

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Before the season is over, we may have a capital Gilbert and Sullivan company on the premises. S. M. Chartock, who has had a long experience with this form of madness, has assembled a promising company which began with "The Mikado" at the Mark Hellinger last evening. Martyn Green, Ella Halman and Radley Flynn, having taken formal departure from the D'Oyly Carte Company, are now leading members of Mr. Chartock's troupe, and naturally expert minstrels in Savoy nonsense.

From other sources, Mr. Chartock has recruited some admirable singers, who are pleasant now and ought to be stimulating when they have caught the fundamental mockery of Savoy opera. Robert Rounseville brings a beautiful tenor voice to the part of Nanki-Poo. Lillian Murphy is an enchanting Yum-Yum—both personally and vocally. Joseph Macaulay's Mikado has an amusingly majestic manner and a fine voice, and Robert Eckles sings Pooh-Bah adequately.

* * *

Peggy Morrison's gay costumes are a vast improvement over the respectable dress of the D'Oyly Carte Company, and Ralph Alswang's settings are bright and sufficient. The conductor is Lehman Engel, who knows Sullivan's music and has played it repeatedly.

So much for the assets of Mr. Chartock's enterprise. They are most effective at present in the sentimental portions of "The Mikado." The madrigal at the opening of the second act is exquisitely sung, and there are other charming episodes in an attractive production.

But a great deal remains to be done before the company can evoke the spirit of Gilbertian humor. At present, you would hardly suspect that "The Mikado" is a comic opera with a dry, crackling, sententious point of view. The entrance music for the Mikado, both in the overture and in the second act, is played in a dull style and with a ponderous tempo that destroy the wit of one of Sullivan's most ironic compositions. Most of the humorous music is played as though it were an ode to an expiring frog — literal and lethargic.

And the humorous parts of the performance are heavy and uncertain. Even Mr. Green, the most gifted Savoyard in the business, is overwhelmed with the sluggish spirit of a company that has not learned yet how to turn pompousness and pedantry into parody. No doubt this is the most difficult thing for a new company to learn. They have to be masters of the medium before they can make an elegant lampoon out of it. The mockery will come only after the singers and performers have absorbed the material into their bones.

* * *

Those of us who have an unreasonable fondness for those pieces of Victorian raillery, with their perfect manners and their mischievous satire, are willing to share the growing pains with the company. The object all sublime is very much worth while. But the growth has to be in the direction of fantastic humor—of dryness, lightness, mimicry and style. And the style has to be impeccable. Without a witty style there is very little that is worth saving in the topsy-turvy world of Gilbert and Sullivan.

At present, Mr. Chartock's company has nearly everything except the crisp, sardonic style that is the essence of Savoy opera. That is why the current "Mikado" is promising, but still unresolved and ragged. The company have learned the tunes, the lines and the business. But they have not yet caught the petulance of Gilbert's humor nor the satiric parts of Sullivan's score.

New York Herald Tribune

October 21, 1952

'The Mikado'

By WALTER F. KERR

SURELY S. M. Chartock has the makings of a sound, durable and popular Gilbert & Sullivan company in the troupe which opened at the Hellinger Monday night. He has bright new settings by Ralph Alswang and attractive costumes by Peggy Morrison. He has an extremely competent company nicely divided between old hands at this sort of thing and promising newcomers ready to take off. He has Lehman Engel to conduct. And he has in Martyn Green the most experienced and engaging clown among modern Savoyards. Mr. Green is also listed as production consultant and presumably has had some voice in the staging.

But the production of "The Mikado" with which the new organization is making its bow is a strangely sleepy affair. Though it moves about the stage nicely, it seems to be miles away. Though the songs are accurately and even pleasantly sung, they have the disembodied quality of music which has been dubbed on a soundtrack.

It is possible that the size of the Hellinger has something to do with this muted mood. It is also possible that Martyn Green, who has sometimes been accused of playing irresponsible tricks with the G & S tradition, is here protecting his orthodoxy and insisting on a certain decorum.

Whatever the cause, the current ladies and gentlemen of Japan clearly have confidence that the score and lyrics will provide all the vitality that is needed, and that their own contribution need consist in no more than behaving themselves and pronouncing every syllable carefully. The same company will be giving us three more of the operettas in the next few weeks and a good bit more energy, together with a good bit more emphasis, would seem to be in order. The form is all there; what is wanted is a fuse.

Even Martyn Green is a little less dynamic than usual. He trots out his drolleries as before: slithering down steps, flopping onto the floor to speak to a bowing subject, bouncing gently when some one sits next to him, registering astonishment at his shrinking fans, and shifting gears wildly as he scuttles about the stage like a devious motorcycle. Mr. Green has always made a very funny Ko-Ko, and he still does. But his mind seems to be elsewhere at the moment, and, when he was carried across stage in exhaustion after the fourth reprise of "Here's a How-de-do," I couldn't quite believe he'd been working that hard.

Robert Rounseville is making his Gilbert & Sullivan debut as Nanki-Poo, and he sings the part nicely though he is still stabbing tentatively at the stage business. Lillian Murphy is a perfectly acceptable Yum-Yum, Ella Halman a characteristically fine Katisha, and Joseph Macauley a jaunty Mikado. Robert Eckles, as Pooh-Bah, does not always do full justice to the music but, with a supercilious mouth and butterfly eyebrows, he makes some of the familiar dialogue freshly amusing.

This Chartok "Mikado" blends too gently into its backdrop, and it is to be hoped that next week's production will step out and look a little livelier.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

October 21, 1952

Distinct, Elegant Mikado Bows In

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Rarely have the renowned Gilbert and Sullivan had such elegant and sympathetic treatment as they get in the hands of the new company of S. M. Chartock's, which is currently presenting "The Mikado" at the Hellinger.

It is a luxurious production, one in which all the words are quite distinct, and furthermore one in which the actors are playing characters instead of patterns, as so often happens with such tradition bound works.

Green Star of Evening.

The present personnel is gathered around the familiar and experienced figures of Martyn Green and Ella Halman, who have often appeared here before with the d'Oyly Carte with great popular success. In the company are some of the best talents in the light opera field of this country.

As has been happening for a long time, Martyn Green is the star of the evening whenever he appears. In "The Mikado" he is Ko-Ko, Lord High Executioner, and plays the jaunty role rather like a retired jockey. He bounces about, whips his feet and his fans around laughably, and instills the clever work with a wealth of comedy all his own.

Running him a close second last night was Joseph Macauley as the Mikado himself. Exotic and sinister in black and yellow costume with gold dragons in a bright blue field, Mr. Macauley stopped the show with "My Object All Sublime." He charged the second act with fine style.

In Grand Manner.

Ella Halman as the elderly maiden Katisha, whose only virtue, a beautiful elbow, is on view Tuesdays and Fridays, is authoritative in a grand manner.

In many many Mikados I have never seen an entirely happy Nanki-Poo, perhaps because he has